



How magic survived the disenchantment of the world[☆]

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Abstract

This article argues that the process described by Max Weber as the ‘disenchantment of the world’ is compatible with the continued vitality of ‘the occult’ in contemporary western culture. Focusing on the example of ‘hermetic’ magical traditions in western culture before and after the pivotal period of the Enlightenment, the article analyses the relation between continuity and change in the development of these traditions from three angles: their *theories* of magical efficacy, the nature of their *practices* and the ways in which magicians seek to *legitimate* magic to the wider society as well as to themselves. The discussion demonstrates that the transformation of magic under the impact of modernization and secularization resulted in the paradoxical phenomenon of a ‘disenchanted magic’. The article concludes by proposing a theory that explains why it is actually quite natural for magic to have survived the disenchantment of the world.

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Introduction: magic and disenchantment

There is something disagreeable about quoting a great work of scholarship merely in order to illustrate an error; but the fact is that the very first sentences of Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) underscore in no uncertain terms the thesis implied by the book’s title. Magical beliefs, according to this author, ‘no longer enjoy much recognition today. Astrology, witchcraft, magical healing, divination, ancient prophecies, ghosts and fairies, are now all rightly disdained by intelligent persons’ (Thomas, 1971, p. ix). Thomas wrote these words in a period

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when the secularization thesis was still widely accepted among sociologists and historians of religion, in spite of the fact that new forms of magic were flourishing widely in the context of the counterculture. Indeed one wonders whether he had ever left his study and his archives to take a look around in the real world. Two years later, even a notoriously bookish intellectual like George Steiner made an observation exactly contrary to Thomas's: 'ours is the psychological and social climate most infected by superstition, by irrationalism, of any since the decline of the Middle Ages and, perhaps, even since the time of the crisis in the Hellenistic world' (Steiner, 1974, in Galbreath, 1983, pp. 11–12).

While Steiner associated such beliefs with a lack of intelligence or schooling, closer study shows that contemporary magicians are often sophisticated, well-educated individuals (Luhmann, 1989, p. 10; Orion, 1995, p. 66). If there is clearly no question of a decline of magic, then, neither is the triumph of science and rationality in western society as evident as modernist theory would have it. At somewhat closer attention one quickly discovers, as formulated by the German sociologist Wolf-Dietrich Bukow, 'wie rissig doch das rationalistische Weltbild, das die Moderne für sich beansprucht, in Wahrheit ist' ('how torn and tattered the rationalist worldview, which Modernity claims for itself, really is'; Bukow, 1994, p. 72). Certainly, he continues, 'modern societies expend very much energy in order to implement a rationalist-scientific worldview in everyday life—the modern citizen spends almost one third of his active life in educational institutions, the praxis of which is permeated by this worldview—but in its rationalistic form at least, this worldview has not really succeeded to impose itself' (Bukow, 1994, p. 68).

Keith Thomas has been explicit about the fact that he regarded his *Religion and the Decline of Magic* as an illustration of Max Weber's famous 'disenchantment of the world' (Thomas, 1975, p. 98). It might therefore seem natural to conclude that the continued vitality of the occult in contemporary society falsifies not only the thesis of a 'decline of magic', but the thesis of disenchantment as well. Not a few contemporary historians and sociologists have indeed drawn that conclusion, or have begun to speak of a 're-enchantment' of the world, illustrated in particular by the rise of new types of popular spirituality, often referred to as New Age (e.g. Gijswijt-Hofstra, 1995; Heelas, 1996). I will argue, however, that Weber's thesis does refer to a real and highly important phenomenon. In order to defend the reality of the process of disenchantment, however, it is not necessary to adopt a Weberian perspective; precisely what Weber understood by *Entzauberung* remains less than fully transparent in any case, since he himself never provided a systematic treatment of the question (Dassen, 1999, pp. 193–204, spec. 194).

In discussing the process of disenchantment, I will understand it as a specific manifestation of the general complex of processes referred to as 'secularisation'. My usage of that term emphatically does not mean, however, that I subscribe to the classic secularisation thesis. Far from involving anything like a disappearance or marginalisation of religion, secularisation can be understood as referring to a profound *transformation* of religion (Hanegraaff, 1996, pp. 406–410, Hanegraaff, 1999a). From this perspective, the term 'secularisation' does not stand for a theory but for a historical fact: it can be understood as referring quite simply to the totality of historical developments in modern western society, as a result of which Christianity has lost its central position as the foundation of western culture, and has been reduced to merely one among a plurality of institutions within the context of a culture which is itself no longer grounded in a

religious system of symbols.¹ That secularisation in this sense has occurred is beyond any doubt; but this does not in itself imply any specific explanatory theory of secularisation bearing on the future prospects of either religion or magic.

One popular explanation of how magic could have managed to survive the disenchantment of the world may be disposed of quickly. In the 1870s, E. B. Tylor portrayed contemporary magical beliefs and practices as ‘survivals’, and this perspective has remained highly popular even to the present day.² It is well known that Tylor’s celebrated theory of survivals rests upon a 19th-century theory of evolution which assumes that magic—and according to many later authors, religion as well—represents a superseded stage in social and cultural development, the present-day remnants of which are now in the process of dying out. This is also how Keith Thomas would have accounted for the occult in his own times. But apart from the lack of evidence for a decline of magic, the theory of survivals rests upon completely unhistorical foundations. It assumes that magic is a static phenomenon which is essentially the same everywhere and in all historical periods;³ under secular conditions it therefore has no other option than either to vanish or try to stay alive as an essentially isolated anachronism.

Strangely enough, professed evolutionists such as Tylor never seem to have entertained the possibility that magic might also survive by successfully *adapting* to new social and cultural conditions. This, however, is exactly what will be defended here.⁴ Such an explanation is incompatible with the classic theory of survivals because it looks at magical traditions as dynamic, diverse, and subject to continuous historical change; and because it does not in any way prejudge the question of which one of the main currents—traditionally referred to as ‘magic’, ‘religion’ and ‘science’—might eventually gain the upper hand in the battle for ‘survival of the fittest’. I know of no good arguments for the widespread intuition that a ‘rational and scientific worldview’ will, in the long run, be better equipped to deal with the pressures of secularisation than its competitors ‘religion’ and ‘magic’. Or formulated differently: it is not as obvious as one might think that ‘science and rationality’ possesses an evolutionary advantage over its competitors. Ideas and practices popularly classed as ‘magic’ may adapt with various degrees of success to the new circumstances of a secularised society, but in the process of doing so they themselves undergo qualitative changes. The result is a survival of magic in a disenchanted world—but the crucial point is *that this will no longer be the same*

¹ ‘Religion’ I define as ‘any symbolic system which influences human action by providing possibilities for ritually maintaining contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning’. Religion in this sense may manifest either as ‘a religion’ (plur. ‘religions’) or as ‘a spirituality’ (plur. ‘spiritualities’; I do not use the term ‘spirituality’ in the singular). For an exposition of this definition and the attendant theory of religion, see Hanegraaff, 1999a.

² For a brief introduction, see Kippenberg, 1996; the most extensive treatment is Hodgen, 1977.

³ See for example Malinowski, 1948, p. 70 (essentially repeating Frazer’s perspective), on the monotony of magic: ‘Follow one rite, study one spell, grasp the principles of magical belief, art and sociology in one case, and ... adding a variant here and there, you will be able to settle as a magical practitioner in any part of the world ...’.

⁴ I therefore contest the views of, e.g., Brian Vickers, who specifically called attention to ‘one of the most interesting, and least studied, phenomena of the occult, namely, its resistance to change’ (Vickers, 1984, p. 7; repeated in Vickers, 1988, p. 265). I would suggest, in contrast, that the blind spot of researchers with respect to the historicity of ‘magic’ is one of the most interesting, and least studied, phenomena in the academic study of religion.

magic that could be found in periods prior to the process of disenchantment. It will be a disenchanted magic.

Our goal then must be to investigate the relation between continuity and change in the development of ‘magical’ traditions in western society under the impact of secularisation and disenchantment of the world. I will do so with primary reference to European ‘hermetic’ magical currents since the Renaissance,⁵ rather than with reference to folkloric beliefs and practices commonly classed as ‘magic’. I have two reasons for this focus. One is that it relieves me of the extra burden of addressing problems of definition. Representatives of hermeticism are virtually unique in claiming the term ‘magic’ as a positive self-designation;⁶ and as a result their own terminology coincides with the standard terminology used by scholars to refer to them.⁷ This is not the case for folkloric beliefs and practices. A second reason is that ‘hermetic’ magic includes the entire range of practices found in the folkloric domain, but combines them with explicit theoretical frameworks presented in terms of underlying worldviews. The question of to what extent ‘worldviews’ and ‘theories’ need to be implied by magical *practices* is of great importance, as will be seen; and precisely for that reason it is advisable to choose examples which combine the practical and the theoretical dimension.

My argument will be based upon a systematic comparison between two important types of magic: a pre-Enlightenment and a post-Enlightenment one. Each of these two types will be discussed from three perspectives: their *theories* of magical efficacy, the nature of their *practices*, and the ways in which magicians seek to *legitimate* magic to the wider society as well as to themselves. Against the background of this comparison I will then sketch the outlines of a theory of disenchantment based upon the adaptation of magic to a secular environment. Like all theories that may nourish some hopes for success, this one too is quite simple in essence.

⁵ References to a ‘hermetic tradition’ have gained currency under the influence of Frances Yates (1964). All the claims implicit in Yates’ approach—i.e., her notion of ‘tradition’, her emphasis on the hermetic component as fundamental to this tradition, and her straight association of hermetism with magic—are highly questionable (see e.g. Hanegraaff, 1998a, pp. xiv–xv, Hanegraaff, 2001, pp. 5–37; Copenhaver, 1988, pp. 79–102). On the other hand, there is such a thing as a ‘hermetic philosophy’ in a strict sense (i.e., the one found in the hermetica themselves, as well as in certain Renaissance texts closely modeled on them, e.g., Lodovico Lazzarelli’s late-15th-century *Crater Hermetis*); and various complex religio-philosophical currents have emerged since the late 15th century which have popularly been referred to as ‘hermetic’ at least by dint of association (cf. Faivre, 1998, pp. 109–123). Pragmatic use will here be made of this terminology, while allowing that a more precise and correct terminology needs to be developed eventually (cf. Hanegraaff, 1998a, p. xi).

⁶ There are some precedents particularly in the neglected domain of medieval ritual magic; see, e.g., the 13th-century author of the *Liber sacer sive juratus*, who referred to himself as Honorius of Thebes (Matthiesen, 1998, pp. 143–162).

⁷ Firstly, please note that although etic terminology is here confirmed by emic usage, this does not necessarily imply that Renaissance apologists of magic endorsed the perception of magic as opposed to religion, implicit in most modern theories of magic. And secondly, while I will here be using the notion of ‘magic’ pragmatically, with reference to emic understandings, elsewhere I have strictly rejected any usage of ‘magic’ as an etic category (Hanegraaff, 2004, in press). This should be kept in mind particularly while reading the final section of this article: my (obviously etic) theory of ‘participation’, as developed there, has no connection whatsoever with any etic concept of ‘magic’—whether in the tradition of Weber and Thomas or according to any other theoretical perspective—and should not be misunderstood in any such sense. I strictly argue that the theory helps explain how and why currents that happen to have been understood emically as ‘magic’ survived the disenchantment of the world, nothing more.

Renaissance magic: theory, practice, legitimation

Theory

In the Renaissance context, three dominant theories may be distinguished with respect to how magical effects operated: the theory of correspondences, the doctrine of *spiritus* and demonic intervention. A major problem in the interpretation of Renaissance magic is the fact that these three theoretical frameworks would more or less seem to exclude one other but have nevertheless tended to mingle and overlap, because of a pervasive terminological ambiguity which permitted fundamental concepts to be interpreted in different ways according to the theory. This in itself made it practically impossible to effect a synthesis by subsuming one theory under another one. Rather, theoreticians of magic tended to emphasise different theoretical frameworks at different moments, without apparently worrying too much about the incompatibilities.

Correspondences

The importance of the theory of correspondences has been emphasised by most scholars in the field, even if they have not all used the same terminology.⁸ I suggest here that the essence of this first dominant Renaissance framework may be defined very precisely as ‘the assumption that the world has been created in such a way that resemblances (whether formal or structural) are the reflection of real connections’. This formulation is intended as an alternative to popular but erroneous assumptions about Renaissance magic, which remain very common today and have their origins in Tylor’s and Frazer’s theory. From the classic Tylorean/Frazerian perspective, the doctrine of correspondences is based upon a simple confusion of ideal connections with real ones.⁹ The magician associates certain things in his mind, and makes the mistake of assuming that therefore they are associated in fact: for example, the interior of a walnut looks like the human brain; ergo its powers must be good for the brain. The correspondences theory is supposed to be based on an elementary ‘error of reasoning’, and it would therefore be hard not to conclude that its adherents must have been quite stupid.¹⁰ Such interpretations are profoundly anachronistic, however, and ignore the intellectual sophistication of Renaissance thinkers like Marsilio Ficino or Cornelius Agrippa. They make the fundamental mistake of treating the theory of correspondences on a par with a scientific hypothesis, failing to understand or appreciate the fact that it is primarily grounded in a religious worldview.¹¹ From the perspective of (neo)platonic types of Christianity, there was nothing irrational about the theory at all. God had created the world as a beautiful and harmonious whole; and this divine creation was conceived of on the model of earthly realities imperfectly mirroring the

⁸ See e.g. Faivre, 1998, p. 119 (‘correspondences’); Farmer, 1998, p. 21 and passim (‘correspondences’, ‘correlative thought’); Vickers, 1988 (‘analogy’); Foucault, 1966, pp. 32ff. (‘ressemblance’).

⁹ See my discussion of Tylor’s definition of magic and its problems, in Hanegraaff, 1998b, pp. 253–275.

¹⁰ For this type of interpretation, see e.g. Vickers, 1988; and compare the criticism (justified in my opinion: see Hanegraaff, 1999c) in Tomlinson, 1993, pp. 11–14.

¹¹ For a particularly brilliant critique of the anachronistic fallacy in the history of science, particularly with respect to the so-called ‘occult sciences’, see Simon, 1996.

superior realities in the divine mind.¹² From this perspective, it would be tantamount to irreligion even to countenance the idea that resemblances would *not* be the reflection of real (that is to say: ‘ideal’!) metaphysical connections. It would mean that God’s creation had been knitted together in an arbitrary fashion, without any meaningful underlying structure; if that were so, would not God’s creation literally fall apart? Abandoning the theory of correspondences would thus imply much more than just correcting a logical mistake and replacing one mode of explanation for a better one: for Renaissance thinkers in the hermetic/neoplatonic tradition, it would be tantamount to denying the very foundations of Revelation and Tradition.¹³

Although Renaissance ‘tables of correspondences’ may strike us as arbitrary, it would be a mistake to imagine the Christian hermeticist as indiscriminately associating everything with everything else, according to his fancy. His assumption was that all things in the created universe hung together in a definite way, but on a level of complexity and subtlety that was appropriate to its Creator and could therefore be expected to far surpass the limited capacities of human understanding. Accordingly, the author of the great *summa* of Renaissance magic, Cornelius Agrippa, remarks that the hidden correspondences of letters and names ‘were not instituted casually, but by a certain rule (fittingly unknown to us)’ (Agrippa, 1533, II, 20). The *real* connections of things were believed to be partly hidden from us (i.e., ‘occult’), and in spite of his own elaborate tables of correspondences, Agrippa admits that in practice ‘it is very hard to know what star or sign everything is under’ (Agrippa, 1533, I, 23). Human reason was clearly insufficient when it came to scrutinising divine mysteries:¹⁴ many occult qualities could therefore only be discovered by the trial-and-error of practical experiment.¹⁵ But although man might ‘gaze into a glass darkly’, God had fortunately not left him without clues. Nature itself spoke to man in a language of more or less mysterious signs, which were there to be deciphered; and in his efforts to do so, man might reasonably rely on the testimonies of ancient authorities who possessed superior insight into the mysteries of nature. Moreover, man carried the key to those mysteries within himself, for his very constitution was a microcosmos reflecting the macrocosmos in all respects. All the answers were there, if only one could learn how to interpret the signs. Therefore the ultimate key to knowledge of the world consisted in self-knowledge; such

¹² For the ontological as well as epistemological hierarchy implicit in this perspective, see Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Heptaplus*, Second Proem (Pico della Mirandola, 1965, p. 77): ‘Truly, whatever is in the lower world is also in the higher ones, but of better stamp; likewise, whatever is in the higher ones is also seen in the lowest, but in a degenerate condition and with a nature one might call adulterated. ... among us there is the fire which is an element; the sun is fire in the sky; in the ultramundane region the fire is the seraphic intellect. But see how they differ. The elemental fire burns, the celestial gives life, and the supercelestial loves’.

¹³ On the notion of ‘Tradition’ and its relations to the belief in a primordial ‘hermetic’ revelation, see Faivre, 1999.

¹⁴ Hence the compatibility of Agrippa’s two major books (*De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres* [Agrippa, 1533] and *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et artium, atque excellentia verbi Dei declamatio* [Agrippa, 1531]), which earned him the double reputation of a ‘magician’ and a ‘sceptic’, and the relation between which has puzzled so many commentators. See the excellent discussion in van der Poel, 1997.

¹⁵ On this important point, see Nauert, 1965, pp. 215ff. See also della Porta, 1631, VIII–IX: the causes of occult qualities, such as the sympathies and antipathies that exist among certain things or beings, are impossible for human reason to understand and are known only to the immortal God. Therefore we can only observe them empirically, one by one.

knowledge, however, required the attainment of an exalted visionary state of ‘prophecy’ which far transcended normal human understanding (Agrippa 1533, III, 45–52).

All this throws a different light upon what has been dismissed too easily as the *Schitterlogik* of a Renaissance neoplatonist such as Ficino. In his classic *De vita coelitus comparanda*, he writes that black food causes an increase of black bile, because of its analogous colour; the planet Saturn is placed highest of all the planets, and therefore this planet ‘carries the investigator to the highest subjects’; bites of scorpions are obviously cured under the astrological constellation of Scorpio, and so on (Ficino, 1489). The point here is that what strikes us as so obviously arbitrary could strike the Renaissance mind as so many examples of how perfectly and meaningfully God had created the world, providing man with abundant clues by which he might learn to read the ‘prose of the world’ and use its hidden natural powers to his best advantage.¹⁶

Spiritus

The theory of correspondences makes it possible to explain magic as working immediately, on the basis of a preestablished harmony. A second theory, in contrast, explained magic by postulating the existence of a subtle medium by which magical influences were transmitted: the invisible *spiritus*, which permeated all of creation. We are dealing here with the neoplatonic notion of a ‘subtle body’, as defined by Ficino in a formulation copied by Agrippa: ‘Spiritus is a very tenuous body, as if now it were soul and not body, and now body and not soul’ (Ficino, 1489, III, 31–33; Agrippa, 1533, I, 14).

Our modern tendency of interpreting *spiritus* as a kind of subtle material medium risks ignoring the very essence of the concept, which could not be reduced to matter because it was intended precisely to bridge the gap between soul and the material body. Only on that premise could it (as *spiritus mundi*) serve as the invisible ‘glue’, so to speak, between all the levels of the neoplatonic cosmos. Agrippa explains that ‘as the powers of our soul are communicated to the members of the body by the spirit, so also the virtue of the Soul of the world is diffused through all things by the quintessence. ... By this spirit therefore every occult property is conveyed into herbs, stones, metals, and animals, through the Sun, Moon, planets, and through stars higher than the planets’ (Agrippa, 1533, I, 14).

The concept of *spiritus* was understood to be equivalent to Al-Kindi’s rays (Kaske and Clark, 1989, pp. 50–51). According to Al-Kindi’s theory, all things in the world continually send out rays, visible (such as light) or invisible, and extremely variable in other respects as well (Al-Kindi, 1974, chs 2–3). The emotional passions of the soul likewise result from the effect of rays and in turn send out their own rays (Al-Kindi, 1974, chs 4–5), which may influence the things of the world by way of the *spiritus ymaginarius*. The imagination, coupled with desire and faith, is a potent magical force which may move things in the outside world. It is most effective if combined with verbal utterances and certain (ritual) actions (Al-Kindi, 1974, ch. 6). Against such a background it is possible, for example, to understand a common view of magic as mental domination by *fascinatio*: ‘Fascination is a binding, which comes from the enchanter [*ex spiritu fascinantis*], through the eyes of the enchanted subject, and enters to his heart. Now the

¹⁶ Cf. Gombrich, 1978, p. 180: ‘It is not we who select and use symbols for communication, it is the Divine which expresses itself in the hieroglyph of sensible things’. And cf. the example of Christophoro Giarda, *Bibliothecae Alexandrinae Icones Symbolicae* (1626), pars. 4–5 (Latin orig. as Appendix in Gombrich, 1978, pp. 192–195; English transl. of this passage in o.c., p. 148).

instrument of fascination is the spiritus, i.e. a certain pure, lucid, subtle vapour, generated by the heat of the heart out of the purer blood. Through the eyes it always sends forth rays like to itself. ...¹⁷

Thus the concept of *spiritus* as a subtle medium intermediate between body and soul, and therefore not reducible to either of the two, could serve to explain both physical and psychological effects. Scholars have debated over the relative priority of the theory of correspondences and the theory of spiritus in Ficino's magic (Kaske and Clark, 1989, p. 49), but such a debate seems ultimately futile. The fact is that we find both theories side by side even in the work of the same author: theoreticians such as Ficino or Agrippa do not seem to have felt a need to choose between them. For obvious social/political reasons, this was different in the case of a third theory.

Demons

The previous two theories were intended to present magic as something purely natural: *magia naturalis*. Critics refuted them with reference to a third, and older¹⁸ theory of magic, which held that magical effects were caused by supernatural intervention of demonic beings, and therefore saw magic essentially as pagan idolatry.¹⁹ Since authors such as Ficino or Agrippa routinely referred to the planets as 'gods' and described procedures for 'drawing down' their powers, they were obviously recommending the invocation of pagan deities. These so-called deities were really evil demons in league with Satan; they might masquerade as merely natural forces, but were actually supernatural intelligences. It is clear that in terms of this third theory magic, though real and effective, was unacceptable.

Practice

It was with respect to this third theory that Renaissance defenders of magic found themselves faced with the necessity of social legitimation. But first we must throw a quick look at the question of magical practice in this context. Ficino himself was extremely circumspect about the practical application of magic (Ficino, 1489, III, 15), but D. P. Walker has provided us with a 'conjectural interpretation' based upon Ficino's *De vita coelitus comparanda*, which pictures Ficino as engaged in ritual practice; and additional information from his pupil Francesco Cattani da Diacceto completes the picture (Walker, 1958, pp. 30–35). The primary *modus operandi* of such a ritual consisted in subjecting all the five senses simultaneously to the influence of one heavenly body or constellation. Ficino thought of the bodily senses as the five lower stages in a sevenfold hierarchy (in ascending order: touching, tasting, smelling, hearing, seeing, imagination, reason; Ficino, 1489, II, 15). The two lowest sensual 'pleasures' (touching, i.e., sexual pleasure; and tasting, i.e., gluttony) are rejected by Ficino as 'lethal'. They are compensated for by the addition of two higher, supra-sensual pleasures: imagination and reason. This is the context for understanding the

¹⁷ Agrippa, 1533, I, 50. For spiritus as a vapour of the blood, see Ficino, 1989, I, 2.

¹⁸ The demonologic interpretation of magic is rooted in the New Testament and early apocryphal literature, and found its definitive formulation in Augustine and Isidore of Seville. Concepts of natural magic based upon occult powers and processes in nature, although rooted in antiquity, only established themselves as an alternative due to the influx of Arabic learning after the 12th century (Kieckhefer, 1989, pp. 10–17; 1994, pp. 813–836, esp. 817–821).

¹⁹ On the connection with superstition, cf. Harmening, 1979, pp. 33–42.

conjectural ritual described by Walker, by which magi like Ficino tried to ‘draw down’ the power of the sun. Ficino addresses the sense of smelling by burning the correct (i.e., ‘solar’) sort of frankincense. He addresses hearing by playing a *lira da braccio*, or lute, decorated with a picture of Orpheus charming animals, trees and rocks; and he sings the Orphic Hymn of the Sun. The highest bodily sense, sight, is represented by his contemplation of a talisman; and of course he takes care that ‘in day-time he is in sunlight, and at night he “represents the sun by fire”’ (Walker, 1958, p. 30). Walker fails to mention the role of the two highest ‘pleasures’, imagination and reason, yet they are crucial for understanding the meaning of such rituals. Within a neoplatonic/hermetic context, the ‘outward’ ritual could not possibly be effective unless it were complemented by an appropriate ‘inward’ state of mind: it is only by means of the *imaginatio* that it was considered possible to bridge the gap between the sensual world—the observable realities of ritual practice—and the intellectual world.²⁰

Legitimation

Finally, we reach what I would like to highlight as a third crucial dimension of Renaissance magic, distinct from the theoretical and the practical, i.e. the attempt at social legitimation of magic with respect to prevalent worldviews. Renaissance magic obviously did not exist in a social vacuum. Defending magic, of all things, as a sublime religious philosophy of nature meant inviting criticism and possible persecution. It seems no coincidence that in the same years which saw the appearance of the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum*, both Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola ran into trouble with the ecclesiastical authorities.²¹ As for Agrippa, he achieved an undeserved notoriety as the archetypal black magician and demon-worshipper.²² Renaissance magi were forced to try to legitimate their beliefs and practices by convincing the critics that magic—or at least *their* magic—was a purely natural affair based upon the first two theories; and they needed to refute the suspicion that they actually relied on supernatural intervention, which to the critics could only mean that they were in league with demons. These discussions are of great importance, not least with respect to the witch persecutions, but for our present purposes they need not be analysed in further detail.

Occultist magic: theory, practice, legitimation

Let us now compare this Renaissance perspective with a post-Enlightenment one. As my example I have chosen the 20th-century current of occultist²³ magic which has emerged from a

²⁰ On the role of the imagination, cf. especially the indispensable study by Godet (1982).

²¹ Zambelli, 1985, pp. 49–50. No record survives of the charge against Ficino, but see the discussion in Kaske and Clark, 1989, pp. 55ff.

²² See the useful summary in van der Poel, 1996, pp. 1–14.

²³ Elsewhere I have proposed to draw a distinction between the terms ‘esotericism’ and ‘occultism’, defining the latter as comprising ‘all attempts by esotericists to come to terms with a disenchanted world or, alternatively, by people in general to make sense of esotericism from the perspective of a disenchanted secular world’ (Hanegraaff, 1996, p. 422). For the general category ‘western esotericism’, see Hanegraaff, 2003, forthcoming.

magical order of the late 19th century known as the *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn* (see Howe, 1972; Gilbert, 1997). The elaborate system of symbols and rituals developed by the most creative member of this order, Samuel MacGregor Mathers, has become basic to most kinds of ceremonial magic used in the contemporary occultist scene.²⁴ Although the Golden Dawn-magic of the 20th century is rooted in the hermetic and kabbalistic currents which flourished in the Renaissance, while also making use of even earlier medieval materials, we will see that nevertheless there yawns a gulf between Renaissance *magia naturalis* and the occultist magic of today. Most important in this respect is the dominant tendency among 20th-century magicians to psychologize magic. Before launching into my discussion, it must be noted that I will illustrate this tendency at the example of the Golden Dawn tradition as presented to a popular audience by the occultist Israel Regardie,²⁵ who openly admits that he has heavily edited and even partly rewritten the original documents so as to ‘render them more coherent’ and make them more accessible to modern readers (Regardie, 1969, p. 87). The original documents themselves are scattered over seven major collections, three of which are private and not accessible to scholars (Gilbert, 1986, pp. 176–179). This makes it very difficult to establish to what extent the tendency of psychologisation was already present in the original Golden Dawn. But since 20th-century occultists have taken their inspiration not from the originals but from Regardie’s presentation of them, this need not concern us here.

Theory

Correspondences

The theory of correspondences is of fundamental importance to the Golden Dawn system and to all kinds of ritual magic that have emerged from it. A first thing to notice about it is that modern occultists tend to dislike references to a personal creator-God. The gulf between the Renaissance and the occultist perspectives becomes immediately clear when we read the following words by Regardie:

Though the Golden Dawn rituals persistently use phraseology which implies the belief in a personal God, that usage to my mind is a poetic or dramatic convention ... these rituals take on added and profound meaning from a purely psychological point of view. That is, they are seen to be technical methods of exalting the individual consciousness until it comes to a complete realisation of its own divine root. (Regardie, 1969, p. 29)

In other words: magical techniques are actually psychological techniques intended to develop a mystical consciousness. It is entirely in line with this, that modern occultist magicians actually appear to have serious trouble understanding the original meaning of the worldview of correspondences, the essential rationality of which, as I have argued, was based upon the belief in a personal God who had created the world in such a way that formal or structural resemblances were the reflection of real connections. This meant that relations between signifier and signified

²⁴ The best study of contemporary ritual magic, written from an anthropological perspective, is Luhrmann, 1989. Cf. King, 1970.

²⁵ Regardie, 1969. I have not had occasion to consult the first edition in four volumes [1937–1940]. Cf. also the third and final version (Regardie, 1984). More accessible than these heavy tomes is Gilbert, 1986.

were real and actual, not just conventional; and accordingly, it was quite natural and logical for Renaissance thinkers to believe in the magical power of words and images (Gombrich, 1978; Coudert, 1978). In short, the relation established between a certain name or symbolic seal and—for example—the planetary deity to which it referred was not just a human convention, but was rooted in the very order of things as they had been created by God.

Modern readers have always found such a realist understanding of symbolic correspondences extremely difficult to understand. Since the platonic perspective assumes the world of ideas to be ontologically more real than the earthly one, it collides headlong with our commonsense distinction between ‘real’ and (merely) ‘ideal’ connections. Not accidentally, exactly this distinction forms the basis of the Tylorean/Frazerian definition of magic as based upon ‘the error of mistaking ideal analogy for real connexion’ (Tylor, 1871, pp. 116; cf. 104–105), which has been unquestioningly adopted even by contemporary specialists such as Brian Vickers (1984, 1988) and Wayne Shumaker (1989) as the foundation of their interpretations. For our present purposes, it is particularly important to realise that this difficulty of understanding the Renaissance perspective on correspondences appears to be *shared* by most contemporary magicians.

Occultist magicians in the Golden Dawn tradition work with the symbolic system of the kabbalistic ‘tree of life’, consisting of ten so-called *sefirot*. In the original Jewish context these were understood as the real powers or manifestations of the unknowable deity. For Jewish kabbalists there was nothing conventional about the *sefirot*: they were (and not just ‘signified’ or ‘symbolised’!) the real presence of divinity in the world, and provided the normative basis for an elaborate system of correspondences which participated directly in those powers. Therefore one could obviously not juggle around with them at will: the system of *sefirot* provided a key for understanding the *real* meaning of the various details found in creation and revelation. In the Golden Dawn tradition since Israel Regardie, however, the system is usually understood purely as a matter of convention. The following quotation by a Golden Dawn occultist from the 1960s is entirely typical:

the Tree ... is in fact a universal filing cabinet—and can be used as a common denominator for the analysis of qualitative information on all the philosophical systems and correspondences which otherwise would be a mass of unrelated detail. You will find that correspondences given by different authors vary considerably. By the use of the Tree and the Paths, you will be enabled to verify and check this information and classify it into your own sections. ... As any filing cabinet is a personal matter and very individualistic it is up to the reader to consider carefully these suggestions [given by the author] and to create his own scales (Torrens, 1969, pp. 109, 114).

Thus, from the key to deciphering God’s own handwriting in nature and scripture, correspondences have become a purely individual matter: a convenient way of imposing a symbolic order of one’s own personal preference upon outside reality. The procedures for ‘verifying and checking’ referred to in the quotation are personalised accordingly: ‘Test for the feel of vibrations with your pendulum. Try it in various positions aligned in turn to the four points of the compass. In which position do you find it most active’ (Torrens, 1969, p. 115). This typical New Age jargon would have been completely ununderstandable to a Renaissance magician.

Subtle fluids

Our second theory of magical efficacy is very clearly present as well. The concept of a ‘subtle matter’ responsible for the transmission of magical force can be traced, in various transformations, from the *spiritus* theory of the Renaissance to the electric or magnetic ‘invisible’ fluid that was made famous by Franz Anton Mesmer in the 18th century; it was adopted, often in a crypto-materialist fashion, by spiritualists and occultists, and increasingly came to be psychologised by the end of the 19th century (Hanegraaff, 1996, pp. 430–442, 482–490; cf. Méheust, 1999). Occultists seldom worry about fine distinctions in this regard. One author, for example, describes it as follows: ‘This mysterious thing is the universal magical agent, astral light, the alkahest, the Philosopher’s Stone and the Elixir of Life. Hermetic Philosophy calls it Azoth, the soul of the world, the celestial virgin, magnum opus. Physical science knows it as heat, light, electricity and magnetism’ (Torrens, 1969, p. 28). Needless to say, such equivalences are extremely questionable; but the very carelessness of most occultists with respect to historical detail and finer distinctions is significant: it reflects an essentially pragmatic attitude which is interested in whether a concept ‘works’ more than in whether it is factually or historically correct. Important for occultists is only that there is ‘some kind of subtle stuff’ which ‘somehow’ bridges the gap between mind and matter. The presupposition is that magic is ultimately based on the powers of the psyche: ‘it is the mind that works magic’.

Invisible entities

Finally there is the third, demonological theory. Invocations of angels, and communication with the personal ‘Holy Guardian Angel’ or Higher Self in particular, play an important role in the Golden Dawn system. The primary influence here is the ‘Enochian’ magic of the Elizabethan magician John Dee, who communicated with invisible entities by way of the mediumship of his collaborator Edward Kelley (Casaubon, 1659; Clulee, 1988, ch. 8). Opinions among occultist magicians differ as to whether or not such ‘entities’, and the intermediate or ‘inner’ plane on which they reside, should be understood in psychological or more-than-psychological terms. Some feel that the term ‘psychological’ suggests that these planes and entities are ‘less real’, others do not (Hanegraaff, 1996, pp. 194–197, 224–229). For us, the main point is that the traditional question of whether they might be called *supernatural* has become a non-issue. Since the supernatural God has been replaced by an autonomous Nature, the traditional demonological theory of magic as based on supernatural intervention by demons has ceased to be a clear alternative to the two others. Even if magic works with ‘entities’, it is assumed to do so in a natural way.

Practice

All this has far-reaching implications for magical practice, which is turned by modern occultists essentially into a series of psychological techniques for ‘exalting individual consciousness’ (Regardie, 1969, p. 29), involving meditational practices and, most importantly, visualisation. How far we have strayed from traditional concepts of ‘real’ symbolism is demonstrated by Regardie, who explicitly treats all externals of magical practice as mere conventional tools (Regardie, 1969, p. 44).

The so-called Middle Pillar ritual is generally considered one of the most important practices of the Golden Dawn system. It may serve us as a convenient example, all the more so because its

practice of ‘calling down the universal power’²⁶ bears comparison with Ficino’s and Diaceto’s practice of astral magic. The operator places himself with the back towards a large picture of the kabbalistic Tree, and imagines himself to be part of it. After some preliminary breathing and ‘banishing’ rituals, he has to imagine ‘the universal energy’ (an ‘enormous reservoir of power’) all about him and extending in all directions to infinity. Next he has to imagine the highest *sefirot* (*Keter*) above his head ‘revolving as a sphere of white iridescent light very bright and intense’. This light is said to attract the energy of the universe. The operator then imagines the light descending down to the next *sefirot* and continues to ‘lead’ it down by degrees through all the ten *sefirot* corresponding to his own body. As a result, ‘Eventually you will have your aura activated and resplendent, absorbing the universal energy and charging every organ and all parts of your body’. This practice can next be expanded by adding the power of sounds and of colours, corresponding with the ten *sefirot*. In this way, universal energy is said to be distributed to all parts of the vital as well as the physical body. This is the clue for attracting ‘unlimited energy for whatever purpose you wish’.

Many of the complex ceremonial practices in the Golden Dawn tradition go far beyond this basically simple exercise, which does not differ in any essential way from visualisation techniques as commonly practiced in the context of the human potential movement. Nevertheless, it epitomises the basic approach to ‘magic’ in modern occultism, which rests essentially on training the imagination by means of visualisation techniques.

Legitimation

Defenders of Renaissance magic were forced to legitimise magic against charges of demon-worship and pagan idolatry. Contemporary magicians still have to deal with the suspicion that they are engaged in satanic or otherwise sinister activities, but this aspect of legitimation now concerns merely the need to deal with prejudice from outsiders (Hanegraaff, 1995a). Far more important for our concerns is how magicians legitimise the practice of magic *to themselves*: it is in this respect that they find themselves in a position which is structurally similar to that of their 15th- and 16th-century predecessors. Ficino and Agrippa were Christians who believed in the metaphysical existence of evil; contemporary magicians are secular persons who tend to believe in science and psychology. Both are faced with the necessity to ‘make sense’ of their interest in socially ‘anomalous’ beliefs and practices. The question is how they avoid the resulting threat of cognitive dissonance.

The process of legitimation or rationalisation of occultist magic has been analysed exhaustively in Tanya Luhrmann’s groundbreaking and indispensable study of the subject (Luhrmann, 1989). It is not possible here to provide a detailed discussion of her theory of ‘interpretive drift’, which explains what happens during the process of being trained as a specialist in occultist magic. All the aspects of interpretive drift are important for understanding how secular persons succeed in making sense of esotericism from the perspective of a disenchanted secular world, so that magic may survive the disenchantment of the world by a process of adaptation. Luhrmann summarises her conclusions as follows:

²⁶ Torrens, 1969, p. 170. In what follows I quote Torrens’ instructions (o.c., 170–173), but closely equivalent descriptions may easily be found in a variety of similar books.

people entered magic with the dim notion that it involved a different, and science-like theory of reality. They soon got involved with a range of spiritual and emotional experience to which the ideas were largely irrelevant, and they came to treat their practice like a religion ... rather than like a theory-laden science, and to value it more for its spiritual, symbolic experiences than for the truth of its magical theory. They defended the theory nevertheless. ... Through magic, magicians' perception of their world—what they noticed and experienced—altered and the way they interpreted these perceptions altered. They did not always recognize that their manner of observing and responding had changed. But the end-product was that the business of engaging in magic became reasonable and straight-forward to its practitioners, the practice became emotionally important to them, and when challenged they usually defended magical ideas with force, even though they might have a fuzzy sense of the theory and might change their arguments to suit their questioners. (Luhrmann, 1989, pp. 10–11)

Fundamental to the way occultists rationalize magic is their concept of a separate-but-connected 'magical plane' which exists on a different level of reality. On this plane the things of the imagination are believed to be as real as tables and chairs are real in our everyday world. Perhaps the easiest way to explain the magical use of the concept is by the analogy of a computer. The images on the screen may seem very real, but are the direct reflection of an underlying and more fundamental reality ultimately existing of digits and zeros: a parallel reality which remains invisible to the common user. Only the programmer is able to access this level and work with it; any changes he makes on that level are bound to be reflected in the reality on screen. It is not surprising that so many contemporary magicians also turn out to be computer enthusiasts, for magic is believed to work exactly along the same lines. The magician works on a parallel reality or a 'subtle plane' where the things of the imagination are real. Just like the computer specialist needs to learn a complex programming language with its own symbols and rules, the magician needs to learn a no less complex language of symbols and equivalences based on elaborate systems of correspondences. By mastering such a symbolic language, it becomes possible for the magician to manipulate the realities on the magical plane; and as a result of such activity things will change on the parallel level of the everyday world.

It is hardly possible to overestimate the importance of this concept for understanding how magic is legitimated in a disenchanted world. Processes of secularisation and disenchantment in the everyday world simply *have no bearing on the magical plane*, and hence do not have to affect the reality of magic. As observed by Luhrmann, the purpose of the concept of the magical plane 'lies in keeping unhappy bedfellows apart' (Luhrmann, 1989, p. 276). The other 'bedfellow' is precisely the disenchanted reality of everyday life. The dissipation of mystery in *this* world is compensated for by a separate magical world of the reified imagination, where the everyday rules of science and rationality do not apply. And Luhrmann correctly recognises that this is a *new* phenomenon in the history of western hermetic magic:

The metaphor of a separate-but-connected plane derives in part from the early Hermetic philosophy ... [but] There is no suggestion in Neoplatonic philosophy that different rules of rationality govern mundane, celestial and spiritual. If anything, reason increases with ascent on to higher planes. The advent of psychoanalysis and the emergence of a scientific scepticism altered this understanding of other 'planes'. ... The Renaissance conceptions separated different worlds and saw magic as the means to use the one to influence the other. ... Modern

magic separates different types of stuff, or worlds, which run by different rules, and to acquire magical power the magician must lose hold of his rational mind. The goals have shifted dramatically: to gain essentially the same powers, the Renaissance mage strove for moral purity but the modern magician embraces the non-rational. (Luhmann, 1989, pp. 277–279)

This, then, is the basic concept which allows intelligent and socially well-adapted contemporary individuals to ‘live in two worlds’ simultaneously, shifting roles according to social context. As Luhmann puts it, a bit maliciously, comparing Agrippa with the influential English occultist Dion Fortune: ‘Agrippa’s hierarchy separated angels from impure humanity; Fortune’s “dimensions” separate the priestess from the English housewife’.²⁷

But why? Instrumental causality and participation

We have seen that ‘hermetic’ magic was transformed dramatically under the impact of secularisation processes. On the theoretical level, theories of correspondences and *spiritus* both remain fundamental to occultist magic, but their content is no longer the same. As God the Creator is replaced by an autonomous Nature, symbolic correspondences tend to become conventional and individualised tools for training the creative imagination, rather than real and objectively present signs susceptible to being deciphered so as to discover their magical uses. *Spiritus* tends to become a subtle stuff constituting a separate ‘otherworld’ intermediate between psyche and matter, rather than a subtle stuff intermediate between soul and body within one and the same world. On the level of practice, magic has been interpreted increasingly as a series of psychological techniques for exalting individual consciousness; the original focus on learning how to use the hidden forces of the natural world has become dependent on learning how to use the hidden forces of the psyche. Finally, the need to legitimate magic as non-demonic has been replaced by the need to legitimate it as compatible with a secular and disenchanted world. The practice of magic is ‘made sense of’ in terms of new scientific theories (particularly psychological ones) and a fundamental worldview which posits the existence of a ‘magical plane’ or alternate reality that permeates everyday reality and can be accessed by way of the creative imagination.

Still, the preceding discussion of theoretical frameworks, practices and strategies of legitimation does not even begin to address the question of *why* contemporary people would wish to practice occultist magic in the first place. What is its attraction over wholly secular ‘rationalist-scientific’ worldviews? If magic is interpreted as a type of psychological practice anyway, why not abandon magic for psychology? These questions cannot be answered with reference to theories of magic or strategies of legitimation: for even if we know how occultist magicians explain and legitimate their practice, we still do not know why they would want to do so. I will suggest here that this problem can be addressed in terms of a type of etic theorizing which originated in the writings of the French philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl—an author whose theories still remain among the least understood and most frequently misrepresented in anthropology and the study of religions.²⁸ If

²⁷ Luhmann, 1982, p. 282. The reference is to the influential female occultist Dion Fortune (ps. of Violet Firth 1890–1946).

²⁸ See the excellent introduction by C. Scott Littleton to the 1985 English translation of *Les fonctions mentales* (Scott Littleton, 1985). Malinowski’s caricature of Lévy-Bruhl’s perspective (Malinowski, 1948, p. 25; see below) is
footnote continued on next page

adapted and updated in some respects, Lévy-Bruhl's work provides us with the essential tools for developing an approach to disenchantment that does not gloss over, but instead explains, why it is indeed quite natural for magic to survive the process of disenchantment.

The non-rational

I will begin with a point which is so obvious as to seem trivial. E. E. Evans-Pritchard reminds us that

we are, for the most part, non-logical. Theology, metaphysics, socialism, parliaments, democracy, universal suffrage, republics, progress, and what have you, are quite as irrational as anything primitives believe in, in that they are the product of faith and sentiment, and not of experiment and reasoning. ... We may be a little more critical and sensible than we used to be, but not so much as to make a big difference. ... [Both Pareto and Lévy-Bruhl] wanted to make the same point, that, outside empirical or scientific behaviour, people aim at ensuring that their notions and conduct shall be in accord with sentiments and values, and they do not worry whether their premisses are scientifically valid or their inferences entirely logical. (Evans-Pritchard, 1965, p. 97).

Remarkable about this statement is not its content, but the fact that it needs to be said again and again. Likewise, Tanya Luhrmann in her much more recent study finds it necessary to spell out her conclusion that 'beliefs are not the sort of things they are stereotypically assumed to be: propositional commitments held consciously and claimed consistently and in a logical relationship to other such commitments' (Luhrmann, 1989, p. 353; see also p. 321). Many theoreticians of religion seem to find this position surprisingly hard to accept. Even Lévy-Bruhl, although he consistently rejected the 'intellectualist' fallacy in the interpretation of 'primitive' thought, could still plague himself by the end of his life with the meaningless question 'how is one to understand that the human mind could be at one and the same time the mainspring of the rational and the irrational' (Lévy-Bruhl, 1949, p. 130). It seems to me that the real question is another one: 'how is one to understand that intellectuals can so often be blind to the pervasive role of non-rational factors in human behaviour and belief, including their own?'²⁹

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paradigmatic of the frequent misrepresentations of his work which persist among anthropologists even today, few of whom seem to have actually read Lévy-Bruhl, and much less so in the French original. The revival of serious interest in Lévy-Bruhl begins with Evans-Pritchard (1965, ch. IV; cf. also Evans-Pritchard, 1934). For an interesting example of a recent theory of magic based upon Lévy-Bruhl, see Tambiah, 1990, ch. 5; cf. Hanegraaff, 1996, pp. 79–85.

²⁹ Please note that I am speaking here of 'non-rational' factors, not of 'irrationality'. For example, defenders of rational choice theory rightly criticise the notion that religious behaviour is at bottom irrational, in the sense of people making choices which are not based upon reasons that make sense even to themselves; to be 'irrational' in this sense essentially means being crazy. This criticism has no bearing on the presence and influence of non-rational factors such as, e.g., emotions. Emotions can play an important role in religious behaviour even if such behaviour is ultimately guided by rational choices.

Participation

Lévy-Bruhl's most important contribution consists in his concept of 'participation' (Evans-Pritchard, 1965, p. 86; Tambiah, 1990, pp. 84–90, 105–110; Scott Littleton, 1985, p. xliii). As adequately summarised by Tambiah,

Participation ... signified the association between persons and things in primitive thought to the point of identity and consubstantiality. What western thought would think to be logically distinct aspects of reality, the primitive may fuse into one mystic unity. ... This sense of participation is not merely a (metaphorical) representation for it implies a physical and mystical union. The primitive mind, said Lévy-Bruhl, is indifferent to 'secondary' causes (or intervening mechanisms): the connection between cause and effect is immediate and intermediate links are not recognised. (Tambiah, 1990, p. 86)

The relevance to the doctrine of correspondences based upon 'real' symbolism should be obvious. Although Lévy-Bruhl originally presented participation as a 'law' (Lévy-Bruhl, 1910, p. 77), he eventually came to realise that the human sense of participation is simply an observable 'fact' (Lévy-Bruhl, 1949, pp. 77–78). As for a 'theory' of participation: he came to admit that 'To be honest, I did not have one' (Lévy-Bruhl, 1949, p. 89). The nature of participation seemed to resist any attempt at rational understanding (see Lévy-Bruhl, 1910, p. 77, Lévy-Bruhl, 1949, pp. 206–207). This singular elusiveness still preoccupied (one may almost say, obsessed) Lévy-Bruhl at the time, towards the end of his life, when he was writing his *Carnets*.

In his original formulation, Lévy-Bruhl (1910) tended to overemphasise the connection between participation and 'primitive' cultures, on the one hand, and between causality and modern culture, on the other: 'primitives perceive nothing in the same way as we do' (Lévy-Bruhl, 1910, p. 37; cf. Evans-Pritchard, 1965, p. 91). He increasingly came to recognise, however, that participation constituted a primary and irreducible human constant ('a structural element of man' [Leenhardt, 1975, p. xxiv]) which could be observed in all cultures, although perhaps more easily in 'primitive' ones.³⁰ In the *Carnets* he openly drew this conclusion, noting with obvious relief how many of the problems which had previously puzzled him vanished at once (Lévy-Bruhl, 1949, pp. 131, 164–165, 188). The fundamental problem could now be reformulated: 'It is not so much a question of primitive versus civilised mentality as the relation of two types of thought to each other in any society, whether primitive or civilised, a problem of levels of thought and experience' (Evans-Pritchard, 1965, p. 91).

Lévy-Bruhl had now come to see participation as a purely 'affective' and non-rational category based upon 'feeling' instead of reflection. We fail to rationally understand participation because, '[i]ndeed, it is not understandable'; this is only to be expected, for participation is 'neither thought nor represented, and accordingly ... is not a thing of the intellect' (Lévy-Bruhl, 1949, pp. 5–6). Participation is an immediate datum of human consciousness which cannot be reduced to prior reasoning (Lévy-Bruhl, 1949, pp. 34, 83). Evans-Pritchard rightly emphasised this crucial point in his exegesis of Lévy-Bruhl:

³⁰ This is stated still with some hesitation in Lévy-Bruhl, 1931, pp. xxxv–xxxvi, about the 'catégorie affective du surnaturel', which is the main new element in this book. Eventually, his friend Leenhardt made him realize that even this was not a new element, but merely another name for 'participation' (Lévy-Bruhl, 1949, 137–139, 220).

Primitive man does not, for example, perceive a shadow and apply to it the doctrine of his society, according to which it is one of his souls. When he is conscious of his shadow he is aware of his soul. ... In the same way, a primitive man does not perceive a leopard and believe that it is his totem-brother. What he perceives is his totem-brother. (Evans-Pritchard, 1965, pp. 107–108)

Again one is struck by the relevance to the doctrine of ‘real’ symbolism. The Renaissance hermeticist did not commit an ‘error of reasoning’ by perceiving a talismanic figure and believing it to be a god. What he perceived was the god, manifesting himself in a figure.

At this point I propose to make an unexpected digression, referring to Lévy-Bruhl’s declared opponent E. B. Tylor. In his discussion of primitive mythology, Tylor stated that ‘the animistic development’ of mythology ‘falls within a broader generalisation’ and is ‘part of a far wider mental process’ (Tylor, 1871, I, p. 296). Tylor referred to it as ‘the great doctrine of analogy’; and went on to describe it in remarkably positive terms:

Men to whom [myths] were living thoughts had no need of the schoolmaster and his rules of composition, his injunctions to use metaphor cautiously, and to take continual care to make all similes consistent. The similes of the old bards and orators were consistent, because they seemed to see and hear and feel them: what we call poetry was to them real life. (Tylor, 1871, I, p. 297)

This, I suggest, is nothing less than a prefiguration of the theory of participation: an affective rather than rational stratum in human thought and action, which is more fundamental even than animism, is analogical rather than logical, and is not reducible to primary reasoning. It may be referred to as ‘spontaneous animism’, as distinct from Tylor’s official intellectualist theory of animism as based upon rational inferences made by ‘man the primitive philosopher’. Predictably, Tylor could find no systematic place for it in his intellectualist theory of animism, and this failure undermines the whole of his theoretical framework.³¹

Neither Tylor nor even Lévy-Bruhl succeeded in freeing themselves from the intellectualist bias according to which beliefs and practices have to be based upon ‘theories’ and ‘worldviews’. A correct understanding of ‘participation’ nevertheless requires a radically non-intellectualist interpretation, along the following lines. Participation, I suggest, is

neither a theory (although theories can be developed to account for it, for example a linguistic theory based on real symbols)
 nor a worldview (although a worldview can be explained in terms of such theories, for example a worldview based upon correspondences)
 nor a certain type of symbolic system (although it can be expressed in the terms of such a system, for example a form of esoteric Christianity)
 nor even a mentality (for as a human constant it makes its appearance in any mentality).
 As distinct from all these, participation should be recognised quite simply as a spontaneous tendency of the human mind. As such, it is an immediate and irreducible datum of human experience, which neither permits nor requires further explanation but has to be noted simply as a fact.

³¹ For a detailed discussion, see Hanegraaff, 1998b.

Instrumental causality

Following up on Tambiah's opposition of 'participation' against 'causality' as two basic 'orientations to the world' (Tambiah, 1990, pp. 105–110), I propose to refer to the latter more precisely as instrumental causality,³² and to understand it as closely analogous to participation. Instrumental causality, too, is:

neither a theory (although theories can be developed to account for it, for example a Cartesian one)

nor a worldview (although a worldview can be explained in terms of such theories, for example some forms of 19th-century positivism)

nor a certain type of symbolic system (although it can give rise to symbolic systems, for example the one which dominates contemporary society [cf. Hanegraaff, 1999b]);

nor even a mentality (for, again, as a human constant it makes its appearance in any mentality)

Like participation, it is a spontaneous tendency of the human mind: the tendency to suspect things that happen in the world to be the result of material causation, and to explain events in this manner.

To illustrate this with an example: the play of children has often been invoked as illustrating primitive 'magical' thinking (leading to well-known extrapolations to the 'childlike mind of the savage'), but the spontaneous tendency of instrumental causality obviously has no trouble co-existing side by side with it. A child may be completely lost in a play with dolls; but when suddenly a ghost appears over the rim of the bed, the child is likely to start laughing and ask, 'who is there?' Participation reigns in the play with dolls, but this does not prevent the child from applying instrumental causality to the ghost: somebody must have sneaked under the bed and tries to give it a scare. This illustrates how trivial Bronislaw Malinowski's oft-quoted criticism of Lévy-Bruhl really was: of course there is no reason why 'magical' participation would prevent persons from relying on instrumental causality while fishing or hunting.³³

Instrumental causality in this sense obviously has to be distinguished from the development in modern history of 'instrumental causality' *as an ideology*: the project of establishing a complete worldview based upon a theory (or set of theories) claiming exclusive truth and sufficiency with respect to all dimensions of reality. What is historically unique in modern history is not anything like the victory of causality over participation (or logic over pre-logic thinking, rationality over irrationality, science over magic, and so on). Unique is merely the phenomenon that this particular ideological system has managed, as the outcome of a complex series of contingent

³² This terminology is preferable in order to avoid any confusion, for example with what Lévy-Bruhl would refer to as 'mystical causality', such as invisible spiritual beings or forces believed to cause material events. It also avoids confusion with concepts such as spiritus, understood as providing an intermediate 'cause' of magical effects.

³³ Having dispensed with the formalities of calling Lévy-Bruhl's speculations 'daring and brilliant', Malinowski proceeded to present a quite shocking caricature of the French philosopher's ideas, who is supposed to have argued 'that primitive man has no sober moods at all, that he is hopelessly and completely immersed in a mystical frame of mind. Incapable of dispassionate and consistent observation, devoid of the power of abstraction, hampered by "a decided aversion towards reasoning", [...] unable to draw any benefit from experience, to construct or comprehend even the most elementary laws of nature' (Malinowski, 1948, p. 25). No such ridiculous thesis is to be found in Lévy-Bruhl's work, but generations of anthropologists seem to have believed Malinowski at his word.

social and cultural developments, to establish itself in recent history as the socially dominant symbolic system in western society. It is not the business of the historian to evaluate the truth-claims of this ideology, anymore than those of any other one (religious or otherwise).³⁴ The ideology of instrumental causality may simply be recognized as the dominant ‘narrative’ of contemporary western society; and its defenders’ claim of a privileged status compared with other narratives must be noted as being itself a part of the narrative.³⁵ As such, this ideological system profoundly influences human thinking and behaviour, whether the latter reflects participation or instrumental causality at any given moment.³⁶

Entzauberung

This above perspective allows us to frame the question of disenchantment in terms which make sense of the continuous vitality of ‘magic’. Disenchantment is, firstly, based upon the internalisation (by means of socialisation) of this particular ideology of ‘instrumental causality’, including its claims of exclusiveness and sufficiency. The result is an acute tension with participation. In other cultures and historical periods, participation and instrumental causality may exist side by side without this causing any major problem (except, occasionally, for the odd philosopher). But

³⁴ See Platvoet, 1995, 186, for a distinction between axiomatic and non-axiomatic empiricism (and cf. the discussion in Hanegraaff, 1995b, 101–102). See also Horton’s equivalent distinction between two types of positivism (Horton, 1973, 297–300).

³⁵ The cultural relativism implied by this, and which some may be tempted to call ‘postmodern’, is actually a logical implication of the premises of an empirico-historical approach to the phenomena of human culture (Hanegraaff, 1995b, 100–108, esp. 104 apud nt 12 & 107–108).

³⁶ If instrumental causality as a spontaneous tendency of the human mind should be distinguished from instrumental causality as a deliberate ideology, a similar distinction should be considered in the case of participation: this, too, may manifest either as a spontaneous tendency of the human mind or as a deliberate ideology. Indeed, I would argue that the establishment of instrumental causality as an ideology during and since the 18th century provoked the establishment of a Romantic counter-ideology based upon participation; and that such an ideology of participation has now established itself as a dominant social narrative in e.g. the contemporary New Age scene. The processes of social pressure exerted by both types of ideology, as well as the competition of both types within the contemporary cultic milieu, definitely deserve close study. It should be noted, however, that (contrary to the two spontaneous tendencies) the two ideological narratives do not function on the same level. In modern western culture *as a whole*, in all its dimensions, the ideology of instrumental causality exerts pressure on individuals to deny or suppress their spontaneous tendencies towards participation; and one reaction against such pressure is the establishment of a Romantic counter-ideology. It is only within the more limited context of e.g. a New Age cultic milieu *specifically*, that a Romantic ideology of participation may likewise exert pressure on individuals to deny or suppress their spontaneous tendency towards instrumental causality. In other words, while it is impossible for any participant in modern Western society to escape the social pressure of the first kind of ideological narratives, being exposed to pressure by the second type is by no means inevitable. I would argue, furthermore, that *both* types of narrative compete on an equal basis even within milieus of strongly committed New Agers; only in extreme sectarian contexts (‘sectarian’ being understood here according to Campbell, 1972; cf. Hanegraaff, 1996, 14–16) the influence of the second one may come to predominate to the extent that individuals are pressured primarily or exclusively into denying or suppressing their spontaneous tendency towards instrumental causality. Already in Romanticism it was no different. It would be a caricature to imagine the Romantics as rejecting ideological narratives of instrumental causality out of hand; on the contrary, they took them with the utmost seriousness and were deeply influenced by them. Yet, they sought to escape their implications by relativising their claims of exclusivity and sufficiency, and by developing counter-ideologies that claimed to place instrumental causality within a more encompassing framework.

in a culture which is based upon the social internalisation of instrumental causality as its foundational narrative, participation becomes something highly problematic: it looks like a disturbing anomaly which cannot be accommodated and, in fact, ‘should not exist’. This dissonance between a spontaneous tendency of the human mind and a specific cultural ideology is the foundation of disenchantment. We thus come to the following definition:

Disenchantment=the social pressure exerted upon human beings to deny the spontaneous tendency of participation, by accepting the claims of a culturally established ideology according to which instrumental causality amounts to a worldview capable in principle of rationally explaining all aspects of reality.

Disenchantment as social pressure in this sense may have different effects on different individuals. On the one hand, people may submit to its influence, to various degrees. They may become more or less blind to the presence of participation in their own life; they may also relegate it to a safe ‘enclave’ (such as art) which does not threaten their basic understanding of how the world works; or, in the case of intellectuals, they may try to account for participation within a framework of instrumental causality. Lévy-Bruhl definitely belonged to this category, but his dogged refusal to be satisfied with easy solutions eventually forced him to accept what may be called the rational necessity of recognising the factor of the non-rational. On the other hand, people may react to the social pressure of disenchantment by gestures of rejection, again to various degrees. But even so, they hardly manage to escape the power of the dominant cultural narratives which social institutions instill in individuals almost from birth on.³⁷ In short: disenchantment is practically impossible to avoid for anybody born and raised in contemporary western society.

Occultism

This brings us back to the question we set out to answer: how did magic manage to survive the disenchantment of the world? Part of the answer has been given in terms of an adaptation of traditional beliefs and systems to the new conditions of a secular society. The question *why* contemporary people would want to continue the practice of magic can now be answered in terms of the continuing presence of the feeling of participation, which is felt to be threatened but is considered too important to sacrifice.

In passing, I mentioned the possibility of art functioning as an ‘enclave’ for participation in a disenchanted world, and I remind the reader of Tylor’s statement about primitive peoples that what we call poetry was to them real life. Contemporary occultist practice (based upon the conviction that, on a different plane of reality, the things of the imagination are real) reflects a deep-seated feeling that, somehow, the language of myth and poetry is more than just beautiful, but must convey something about the real nature of the world (Luhmann, 1989, p. 171). The stronger such intuitions are rejected or called into doubt by dominant social narratives, the stronger the emotional need to overcome the dissonance. In this sense, not only does the feeling of participation explain the continuous attraction of magic in a disenchanted world—the

³⁷ This is true even of extreme opponents of ‘modernity’, such as the perennialist or Traditionalist school (Guénon, 1945; Evola, 1982): their discourse rests upon the polemical opposition to modernity to such an extent that one wonders what would be left of their concept of ‘Tradition’ if modernity did not exist.

experience of disenchantment actually causes an emotional need to reaffirm participation. Occultist magicians do not practice their rituals because they are looking for ‘proof’ for participation; nor is such ritual practice dependent upon any theory which occultists may come up with in order to legitimise it. On the contrary, that the ritual circle provides a space ‘set apart’, where the feeling of participation is allowed to be freely celebrated, is more than sufficient to explain the enjoyment and emotional satisfaction provided by occultist practice in a disenchanted world (see [Luhmann, 1989](#), p. 176); it is only on the level of theories and worldviews that occultists may feel a need—having stepped outside ritual space—to legitimise such practice so as to make it compatible with that world.

Conclusion

Practices traditionally classed as ‘magic’ have always relied, and still rely, upon the spontaneous human tendency of participation.³⁸ The coexistence of participation with instrumental causality did not cause acute problems on the level of society in general, until the establishment of an ideology of instrumental causality as the dominant narrative of western society. This new phenomenon produces strong social pressure on individuals to deny participation. Some of those who resist this pressure find a natural resort for expressing such resistance in the practice of occultist magic. ‘Magic’ survives because the spontaneous tendency of participation belongs to human nature; but it becomes ‘occultist’ magic because practitioners feel the need to legitimate their practice in a disenchanted world.

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³⁸ But see my remarks in note 7. The argument is equally applicable to various other human practices and dimensions of social and individual experience, including many that would normally be classed as aspects of ‘religion’.

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